

Compassion Cultivation Protocol

Introduction

What follows is a step-by-step meditation protocol developed specifically for the cultivation of compassion: the genuine wish for others—ideally for *all* beings—to be relieved from their suffering. This protocol is designed to be implemented during an eight-week course, each 2-hour session consisting of a pedagogical instruction, guided group meditation, as well as a discussion, to be supplemented by 20-30 minutes of daily meditation at home by all course participants. The protocol is based on a standard meditation training practiced in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. By engaging in this practice the person to be trained deals progressively with the indifference one habitually feels towards those considered to be strangers and the dislike felt towards those considered to be one's adversaries. As a result of this training, such indifference and dislike are replaced by the compassionate wish that all beings, no matter how we might have felt about them in the past, may be relieved of their dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Since this protocol is designed to be used by people from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, attention has been paid to ensure that the practices presented here are thoroughly nondenominational and secular.

According to the contemplative tradition from which these meditation practices are drawn, *compassion* is understood to be a mental state that has two primary characteristics: (1) it is focused on *another being's pain or suffering*; and (2) it manifests itself in the form of a *wish* or an *aspiration for that being to gain freedom from that pain or suffering*. At its most fundamental level, compassion is seen as an expression of our basic mental attitude of *caring*. It is our natural capacity to care for our own welfare that serves as the basis for our ability to feel empathy for others. In order to feel such empathy, we must not only wish to be rid of our own pain and suffering, we must also be able to feel a sense of *connection* or *identification* with others. These two—an individual's sensitivity to his or her own pain and suffering and that same individual's sense of connection with others—constitute what can

be called the root of *loving, empathic concern*. It is this empathetic concern that engenders the compassionate attitude that finds others' suffering to be as unbearable as one's own.

According to the Buddhist contemplative tradition, it is considered possible through deliberate cultivation to extend one's empathetic concern even to one's adversaries. Further still, it is claimed that an individual can generate such empathy for all sentient beings and, on that basis, generate genuine compassion for all beings. This so-called "great compassion" is to be distinguished from mere pity that feels sorry for someone else; it is devoid of any hint of being patronizing or condescending. Genuine compassion is based upon the simple recognition that someone else's suffering is akin to one's own suffering, and that just as one wishes to be free of one's own pain and sorrow, one can feel the same about another's unhappiness. This greatly compassionate attitude expresses itself in a progression of heartfelt wishes, from the simple, "How I wish that all beings might be free of their pain and sorrow," to the more decisive, "May all beings be free of their pain and sorrow," to the active and personally committed, "I shall work to ensure that all beings are free of pain and sorrow."

Most of the Buddhist practices designed to cultivate compassion follow a clearly delineated developmental process, moving through distinctly identifiable mental states. For example, to help overcome our natural tendency to discriminate against those to whom we feel indifferent or even hostile, the first stage in compassion meditation involves the cultivation of *equanimity*. This is the deep recognition that just like myself, others also aspire for happiness and wish to avoid even the slightest suffering; it is through such recognition that a common bond with others is established. The next stage involves the cultivation of *empathic concern*, an attitude that, holding others dear, enables our heart to be sensitive to others' pain and suffering. Such empathetic concern arises on the basis of having cultivated a genuine sense of *appreciation of others* through recognizing the profound ways in which one's own welfare is intimately interconnected with the welfare of everyone else. Together these two affective states—equanimity and empathetic concern—establish the necessary basis for the arising of genuine compassion.

The practices whereby compassion is cultivated typically culminate in the generation of what could be called a more "active" form of this affective state. Such active compassion is an altruistic concern involving the deliberate evocation of the wish to *do something* about others' suffering. In formal sitting practice, this stage involves what is

known as *tong-len* (or “giving and taking”) meditation. This is essentially a visualization practice that involves, as a first step, imagining “taking” upon oneself not only others’ pain and suffering, but the destructive patterns of thought and behavior that are the deep causes of this suffering. The second step in this meditation involves imagining “giving” to others everything that is positive in oneself, including one’s material prosperity, happiness, joy and the beneficial patterns of thought and behavior that bring about such joy.

In the classical formulation of compassion meditation practice, *equanimity* is likened to a well-groomed soil, *empathic concern* to moisture, while actual *compassion* is compared to the seed that can then sprout easily in the garden that is the human heart.
